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ABSTRACT

Since risk suffuses human life and trust helps breaks the paralysis of dealing with risk, a philosophy of education must account for the relationship between risk and trust. Keith Lehrer (in progress) has developed a philosophy that seeks to prepare students for knowing as human beings actually know things, suggesting that knowledge is a matter of coherence and that trust is a central emotion in the experience of coherence. People must trust themselves if they are to know anything, and further, they must trust themselves to know when they cannot trust themselves or when they must seek expert assistance. To help students develop this complex sense of trustworthiness, the educational process must allow students to encounter risk, primarily through instructors who risk themselves in the classroom. Instructors should not attempt to teach from a position of invulnerability, but rather teach what they value and how they think. In practice, this means that students should graduate from educational institutions having had fairly frequent experiences of teachers working outside their own disciplines, since an instructor's discipline can function as a risk-free area from which to teach. Two other applications of this philosophy would entail administrators working in the classroom and instructors completing their own class assignments along with students, especially those that involve a personal dimension. (BCY)

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TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATIONAL RISK

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Risk suffuses human life. Education that would prepare students for life must prepare them for handling risk. Trust breaks the paralysis of risk. Education that would prepare students for negotiating risk must prepare them for responding appropriately with trust. Thus, a philosophy of education must account for the dyadic relation between trust and risk. In a book in progress, *The Keystone Mine*, Keith Lehrer focuses on one half of the dyad, though not without at least implicit acknowledgement of the other half. He locates our knowing in responses of appropriate trust and distrust. Lehrer's work thereby grounds a philosophy of education that would inform educational practices for preparing students for knowing as human beings actually know, for knowing by addressing risk with appropriate trust.

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I

The Epistemology

Lehrer argues that knowledge has no single foundation, such as the data of our senses, or logic, or intuition. Rather, knowledge is a matter of coherence. But crucial to the coherence--and this point distinguishes Lehrer's view--is the emotion of trust. Trust, is central to all knowledge.

There is no certainty, Lehrer would allow, but that does not mean that there is no knowledge. I may legitimately say that "I know" if I trust myself and my trust is trustworthy. Take a practical example. You are not utterly certain that, as you drive to work tomorrow, your car will not, say, be simultaneously involved in a front end tire blowout and mechanical steering failure. But you are justified in your belief that you will not suffer such an awful occurrence. The point is not that you could not be wrong--the highly improbable event *could* occur; nevertheless, you have formed your confidence in your car in a trustworthy manner, from years of experience with cars, and now you can trust your confidence in the car.

Or consider another example. You are not utterly certain that your work as a teacher has real value in the overall scheme of things; but you trust that it has value, and your self-trust is probably trustworthy, given your experience of your students as they progress through the semester and into their lives after graduation.

Now, the matter is not simple. Not only must we trust ourselves if we are to know anything; we must trust ourselves to know when we *cannot* trust ourselves. We must trust ourselves to know when we must *distrust* ourselves. Then we go to our physician, attorney, friend, whomever. We trust ourselves to seek opinions that are more trustworthy than our own. Moreover, we trust ourselves to know when to distrust those to whom we have gone because we distrusted ourselves. Then we trust ourselves to seek a second opinion. Ordinarily, the word 'trust' sounds a little bit like apple pie--just a bland, harmless, uncontroversial concept. That isn't at all what Lehrer means. Trust is fraught with complications; becoming trustworthy is fraught with difficulties. Trustworthiness involves knowing when to trust ourselves, including when to trust our own self-distrust.

Lehrer's epistemology, I think, accords with our actual lives. We really can't claim certainty about the important questions in our lives. Take career changes: Many of us have made them, many more will, and probably none of us can predict with certainty that we won't change careers. All we can do is learn to trustworthily trust ourselves, and trustworthily trust our self-distrust.

Trust that is trustwoorthy breaks the paralysis of risk. For example, a range of investment options, in all their complexity, may immobilize me. When I trust myself to go into the stock market, I trust myself to confront risk; when I trust myself to leave the market, I also trust myself to take a risk. As any investment counselor will note, there is no avoidance of risk, whether in or out of the market. Indeed, the relationship between trust and risk is logically necessary. Trust presupposes risk: I can no more "trust" myself in a situation free of risk than, in 1995, I can "hope" that the Berlin Wall will fall. Hope entails that things might turn out otherwise than I hope; trust entails that things might turn out otherwise than I trust.

The Educational Implication

If this epistemology does accord with the way we actually must lead our lives, and if our job in higher education consists in preparing students for the lives that they will lead, we must prepare students to trustworthily trust themselves, and trustworthily distrust themselves, in a world characterized by risk. Education may be defined as the process whereby students learn to trustworthily encounter risk. Therefore, in our classrooms, in our campuses across the country, they must encounter risk.

How do we provide this encounter? The answer follows from a point that I have been told Mary Rose O'Reilley makes: We do not really teach our disciplines; essentially, we teach ourselves. (Whether this is her language, I am unsure, but the idea can be found in her *The Peaceable Classroom*, published by Boyton/Cook, 1993, pp. 30-31.) Primarily we teach what we value and how we think. If we remember our own favorite undergraduate teachers, what we remember is their stories, their jokes, their doubts, their ways of thinking through problems. By and large, we remember their values, and their physical and mental behavior. They taught themselves;

today we teach ourselves, which means that, to a considerable degree, we teach those teachers who taught us.

Therefore, if we are going to teach students how to take risks, we have to take risks. The risks have to be real. It will not do for us to come into the classroom and say, "You must learn to trust yourself in taking risks, and learn to distrust yourself and trust others in taking risks"--all this while speaking from a position of invulnerability, a risk-free position. The reason is the same: We teach ourselves. If we do say, from a risk-free position, that students should learn to take risks, we will teach not that we value encounter with risk, but that we value dissembling, since what we say it is good to do we do not consider a good for ourselves. Therefore, in higher education, we *all* have to take risks, instructors as well as students. I suspect the point applies to administrators and the entire institution: As with faculty, the college exhibits certain values and thereby teaches itself.

Several Applications

Many applications follow from a philosophy of risk and trust. I will propose just three. First, students should graduate from our

colleges and universities having had fairly frequent experiences of teachers working outside their own disciplines. Our disciplines serve as one of our major security blankets. We know our discipline, we know our textbook, we know our course. We're in charge. In *our* discipline, *our* textbook, *our* course, we're invulnerable. Students seldom know something we don't know, because we've designed the course around our knowledge base. There's little risk here. Students need to see us outside our knowledge base, where we are unsure of ourselves.

There are numerous ways this could be worked out in practice. To mention just one, imagine a philosopher who's done very little work in the hard sciences. He could work in a course with a physicist. She could teach most of the physics, he could raise various questions, some of them philosophical questions about the physics that might otherwise have gone unasked. Although the philosophical questions might seem within his discipline, he is, in fact, working at the edge of his knowledge base, having done little physics before. Maybe he would take the tests along with the students. Maybe he would be in charge of explaining one or two units, which would require a lot of learning and real vulnerability, and the physicist would be present to correct him.

It would be vital, were we to institute some such experience for our students and for ourselves, that we not compromise the integrity of academic credentials. We must distinguish between our *working* outside our field and our *teaching* outside our field. We should assiduously resist referring to such cooperative activity as 'team teaching.' The academic integrity can and must be maintained. It would be maintained because the philosopher would be working in the presence of the physicist, and because all of the students would understand that the philosopher is involved to learn and to model learning for the students.

This process, if it were common on our campuses, would have various values. Among others, it would affirm that it is good to be a learner throughout life; it is permissible not to know; it is permissible both not to know *and* to speak since no one knows everything. It is good to take risks.

I mentioned this application to a colleague at the community college where I teach. She said she would feel "cheated" if she enrolled for a course and then discovered that part of the discussion might be led by someone who was not trained primarily in the particular

discipline. Implictly, my colleague was unmoved by the distinction between "teaching ourside one's field" and "working outside one's field." That second professor, the one "working" outside his own field, would be wasting her time, as she said, "cheating" her. Now, whether my colleague's criticism really does tell against this application depends on whether life can be insulated from risk. Perhaps if we can become specialists who essentially know it all in our speciality, obviating risky decisions, then we should not model our lives on people who negotiate risk effectively. There are two problems with this possibility. First, most of our lives are lived outside our specialties, so even neurosurgeons must learn to handle risk. Second, risk suffuses even our own specialities. An acquaintance who, in fact, is a neurosurgeon told me that frequently, after he had performed on a patient's brain, he found himself praying not that the surgury had worked but that, more modestly, he had not made some inadvertent, catastrophic mistake. It would seem that certainty is unattainable. To name it an unattainable "ideal," makes it no more attainable. So, it seems, our students do need models of professors who are working in risk-laden situations.

A second application of a philosophy of trust and risk would involve administrators entering the classroom. For example, a faculty

member and an administrator could jointly volunteer to work in a section together for a semester. Perhaps the administrator would take tests and write papers; perhaps she would explain a unit or two. If her graduate work was, say, in English, she would probably not be doing this with an English instructor. Her vulnerability needs to be clear. She needs to work in chemistry or mathematics or computers.

In addition to expressing the value of encountering risk, such a procedure would communicate clearly that we value education from the president throughout the administration and faculty. Often, in higher education, we send a double message: "It is good to be a returning student, but that doesn't apply to me since I have X number of degrees and publications." But since learning really never should end, for any of us, students should see their own professors, and administrators, in classes. One might say that administrators do not need to be involved in this process. Possibly. But I am inclined to say that their involvement would enhance the sense, felt by us all, that we work within a learning *community*. Students should experience their philosophy instructor, or a dean, or the president, someone, say, who has done little work in economics, struggling through a tough economics class, or even trying to explain part of it under the supervision of an economist.

Third, whether we're working outside our disciplines or teaching inside our disciplines, we should do some of the assignments ourselves, the assignments that involve a personal dimension. Sandy Desjardins, English Professor at Mesa Community College, suggested this idea. In some of her classes, she does the same writing assignments that she gives to the students. There are various values to this approach. For a start, she makes herself vulnerable. The assignment may involve self-examination, self-reflection, self-criticism. It may involve her own criticism of her own rhetoric, or the students' criticism of her rhetoric. The assignment involves risk. By doing it herself, she says, "It is good to encounter risk." She doesn't try, on the one hand, to tell students to take risks, while on the other, indicating through her behavior, that she really values invulnerability.

Many applications, in addition to these three, will present themselves. Whatever the application, the goal is to infuse the classroom with the spirit of our actual lives, including our doubts, our frequent initiations into new domains, the questions that often outnumber our answers; to engender a capacity to appropriately

trust ourselves, and our companions, on journeys with but indistinctly disclosed destinations.